REVIEW ARTICLE

LIVING TO TELL THE TALE*

In the decade preceding the outbreak of World War II, a Russian emigré, Alexandre Kojèvnikov (the legendary "Kojève"), produced an intense and sustained reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* in a series of lectures delivered at the École Pratique des Hautes Études in Paris. Those lectures, which continued from 1933 to 1939, were regularly attended by future French intellectual luminaries such as Aron, Bataille, Koyré, Merleau-Ponty, and, notably for the work under review here, Jacques Lacan. It is fair to say that Kojève's "Introduction to Hegel" was to have a profound impact on twentieth-century thought.

In July 1940, amidst the German occupation of France, Simone de Beauvoir took a reader's ticket to the Bibliothèque Nationale and embarked on a systematic reading of Hegel's *Phenomenology*. "Just as at the age of twenty, my heart bleeding . . . I read Homer 'to set all humanity between myself and my private grief,' so now I endeavoured to sink this present experience of mine in the 'trend of world-development.'" It was notable that when *The Second Sex* was first published, in 1949, it took its point of departure from the relations that Hegel had rendered significant for modernity, the relations of Self, Other, and Desire: "The question before us is why is woman the *Other?*"

Kojève's lectures were collected and published in 1947. In 1954 Lacan launched a "return to Freud" that was in effect as much a return to Hegel, with all the subtleties of the dialectic. A "return to Hegel" was proclaimed by both the Left and Right in the last decade of the twentieth century. On the one hand, the Straussian engagement with Kojève culminated in Francis Fukuyama's The End of History and the Last Man (1992), a celebration of liberal democracy as the only remaining ideological possibility after the fall of the Berlin Wall. On the other hand, Slavoj Žižek pursued a return to Hegel in the nineties through a Lacanian reading of the Hegelian texts that had fallen from favor—but never from critical attention—around the time of Kojève's death, which coincided with the events of 1968. Žižek was characteristically less enthusiastic about the political prospects, quoting Churchill's dictum, "democracy is the worst of all possible political systems, the only problem is that none of the others is better."² In The Limits of Heroism: Homer and the Ethics of Reading, Mark Buchan emulates Žižek in approach, outlook, and tone. After late Marxism there has been a late revival of Lacan's work. In B.'s psychoanalytical approach, there is a turn reminiscent of the Freudian resolution, "If I can sway no heavenly hearts, I'll rouse the world below."

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^{*} The Limits of Heroism: Homer and the Ethics of Reading. By MARK BUCHAN. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2004. Pp. [x] + 282. \$65.00 (cloth).

^{1.} S. de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, trans. P. Green (Harmondsworth, England, 1965), 458.

^{2.} S. Žižek, The Sublime Object of Ideology (London, 1989), 48.

The continuing pertinence of Hegel's *Phenomenology* rests in part on the memorable "historicization" of the relation between Self and Other in the famous Master–Slave dialectic. History was imagined as beginning with a primal confrontation between two contestants in a bloody struggle for recognition. The individual was prepared to stake his life in mortal combat, the powerful instinct for self-preservation overcome by a desire for recognition. Here Hegel took the significant step of proceeding beyond mere desire to define a "desire for desire." One would risk one's life out of desire to be acknowledged by another human being, a fundamental desire for the desire of the Other. The "battle to the death" can have another outcome, and Hegel developed a subtle reading of the relation between Lordship and Bondage, which ensues when one of the contestants decides to submit to a life of slavery rather than suffer violent death. In B.'s version of the Homeric enactment of this encounter, the hero seeks only one outcome. A bleak landscape is riven by a dark desire: at the limit of heroism "the hero tells of the destruction of the entire world to no one" (p. 109). Heroism is construed as the desire to annihilate.

B.'s work can also be traced back to another notable contribution to cultural studies that emerged during the Second World War. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Horkheimer and Adorno returned to Homer and Hegel, invoking the *Odyssey* as the "basic text of European civilisation," in search of an explanation for a new kind of barbarism. In reconsidering the savage "vengeance wreaked by civilisation" in the *Odyssey*, they leveled a charge against the "authoritarian philologist," Ulrich von Wilamowitz, claiming that his "writings are among the most emphatic documents of the German intermingling of barbarism and culture erected on the basis of modern Philhellenism." Although reference to the work of Horkheimer and Adorno is curiously absent from the book under review here, one of their observations has a particular pertinence not only for B., but more generally: "pleasure has learned self-hatred and therefore . . . remains mean and disabled by self-contempt."

The Limits of Heroism is an intelligent, unconventional, and often unwieldy study, primarily of the Odyssey. Very much in the Hegelian mode, the first three chapters consist of three moments. It has been said that our human amour propre, our conception of ourselves as "masters of the universe," or even "lords of the world," has suffered three major blows through intellectual history, those delivered by Copernicus, Darwin, and Freud. B.'s book commences with three narcissistic woundings, suffered by Polyphemus, the Phaeacians, and Proteus respectively. These figures all discover a previously unsuspected fallibility. But beyond these characters in the story, it is the audience of Homer that has to be disabused of the tales we tell ourselves when we take pleasure in the Odyssey.

To read the *Odyssey* as a story of survival and homecoming is for B. only to follow a "well-trodden" path and to walk in the footsteps of Odysseus. B.'s trajectory is in the opposite direction, regressively against the story of return, in a search for origins. He sees this "most teleological of epics" as "deeply aetiological" (p. 15). This search, however, is as teleological as the critical consensus he censures. For B. the key is not the story of *nostos*, but the story of Genesis. Readers will be familiar with the concept

^{3.} M. Horkheimer and T. W. Adorno, Dialectic of Enlightenment, trans. J. Cumming (New York, 1972), 79.

^{4.} Horkheimer and Adorno, Dialectic (n. 3 above), 31.

of a biological trauma at birth, but the Lacanian story is one of a trauma upon entrance into the socio-symbolic world of language. This genesis of the subject is accompanied by irretrievable loss and the emergence of desire. B. invokes Fink's exposition of Lacan: "Why would a child ever bother to learn to speak at all if its needs were anticipated, if its caretakers fed it, changed it . . . and so on before it even had a chance to feel hunger, wetness, cold, or any other discomfort? . . . If nourishment is never missing, if the desired warmth is never lacking, why would the child take the trouble to speak?" Lacan's construction of the "hommelette" (his own witty coinage) as a little creature whose only need is to demand, and, in demanding, to discover desire, is one possibility. However, one can think of others that should not, perhaps, be excluded from consideration.

B.'s wager is that this depiction of the infant in relation to language applies "equally well to the Cyclops." When the booming voice of Polyphemus crashes through the night, shattering the sleep of the asocial aggregate of Cyclopes, they respond, if only to put an end to an insufferable disturbance. The commentaries (for example, Stanford, Heubeck) observe that Polyphemus is "first named" in the narrative at 9.403. B. presses the point to make of the name a "primal baptism." It is only now that the Cyclops is named for the first time as "Polyphemus," a "Chatterbox" (B.'s somewhat feeble rendering) who has become a social nuisance. This entrance into language "for the first time" would thus coincide with a primal wounding (the blinding), a symbolic castration, and the fall of the Cyclops from his former paradise of omnipotence and self-sufficiency.

The suggestion is interesting but rather contrived, in a way that is typical of B.'s interpretations. B. construes this scene dramatically as a primal "breaking of a perennial Cyclopean silence." But the narrative has already made mention of the $\phi\theta\sigma\gamma\gamma\dot{\eta}$ of the Cyclopes at the outset (9.167), and Odysseus and his captor have already been engaged in dialogue and negotiation of their "guest-host" relationship well before the scream through the night. Indeed, all of this had been foretold long before ($\pi\alpha\lambda\alpha\dot{\iota}\phi\alpha\tau\alpha$, 507–16) in a discourse that is not devoid of names. In discussion of the passage, Norman Austin is chastised for "mak[ing] an unwarranted generalization" (p. 239) in his 1980 article on this scene, a consideration that does not inhibit B. himself. For example, if, before the blinding, the Cyclops had no concept of wandering or loss, why did he make the effort to herd his sheep and goats into pens?

Persuaded by the verifiability of the view that, in general, life is nothing other than an appointment with disappointment, or worse, B. seeks analogous cases throughout the *Odyssey* that would illustrate Lacanian principles and in so doing strip us of our impossible fantasies and delusions. The *Odyssey* becomes an exercise in demythologization. Dimock once observed that both the Cyclopes and Phaeacians "live in a dream-world," and Phaeacia is the other major example in B.'s study. In general a significant underlying aspect of B.'s work is the way in which the book consists of repeated tellings of the story of the Fall. The didactic mode of Lacan and Hesiod takes over. The treatment of the Phaeacians is distributed over several chapters.

The encounter between Odysseus and Nausikaa is entitled "Enter Pandora" (p. 195) and it is notable that the Hesiodic Pandora has, in B.'s account, become a prominent figure in the story of Odysseus. This second major example cannot be staged as an entrance into language, since the Phaeacians (like the Cyclopes) are already articulate; and well before "the Fall" the Phaeacians have already experienced the significant loss of their original homeland. Nausikaa's mind has been filled by Athena with the idea of a possibility so momentous that she cannot even utter it to her father, the *Odyssey* thereby highlighting its great theme of marriage. That she conceived of such a desire *before* her encounter with Odysseus on the seashore is unacceptable to B. His response is to engage in a *petitio principii*. Since "for psychoanalysis, there is no desire without a prohibition," Nausikaa's prior desire for a husband was "not a true, human desire" (p. 195). All of B.'s analyses insist upon an absolute distinction between "proper," "true," "real," "human" (what psychoanalysis deems "normal"), and the false, fanciful, fictional, impossible, or imaginary. Odysseus' discourse with the Cyclops before the blinding was similarly deemed to be not "proper" discourse "as such."

On B.'s account, the paradise of Phaeacia is pierced by "a violent, external intrusion," the arrival of the foreigner, who fools the Phaeacians and generates a desire that can never be satisfied. It is as though these people suddenly realize that they are naked, unprotected and open to harm. The serpent–Eve–Pandora–Nausikaa–Odysseus complex leads to the Phaeacian "loss of innocence." The "fall of the Phaeacians" is "intimately associated with the emergence of Nausikaa's desire" (p. 198). Before the arrival of Odysseus, Phaeacian society was a paradise that did not know loss, competition, *eris*, contestation of identity, shame, desire, or even (strangely) enjoyment. Odysseus introduces them to the incurable wound of mortal existence. Throughout the epic, Odysseus is the $\pi \dot{\eta} \mu \alpha \tau \sigma \dot{\alpha} \dot{\alpha} \rho \chi \dot{\eta}$.

By pursuing myths of origin, B. stakes his claim to originality. His treatment of the *Odyssey* produces a list of firsts. Each time the scene is primal; throughout the book something regularly occurs "for the first time." But there are inherent problems in this mission to locate the first. A small indication of some of those difficulties might be found in the fact that, when citing Hesiod's description of Pandora, B. (p. 190) fails to translate the word $\pi\lambda\alpha\sigma\tau\dot{\eta}\nu$ (*Theog.* 513–14). The "first woman" is, in more than one sense, something of a counterfeit construction, and the story of the first woman as the origin of evil, the source of suffering and affliction, the cause of the Fall, is an objectionable fabrication. That B. feels the need to have recourse to Pandora at all is not the only disturbing consequence of his desire to tell an authoritative and empowering story of genesis.

At this critical point in his work B. (like his model, Žižek) blurs an important issue. The primary scenario that B. repeatedly constructs for the *Odyssey* is a very familiar and highly significant one. Always it is the arrival of the outsider that precipitates the fall from Paradise. Violence is introduced by the foreigner, who is perfidious—an Odysseus. This intrusion contaminates the purity of a hitherto entirely innocent community. One might conclude that all was well before the arrival of the foreigner.

^{7.} In general the handling of the Greek leaves something to be desired. For example, only a conspicuous mistranslation and failure to recognize an insistent feminine participle in the passage, *Od.* 19.203–12 (p. 223), could lead to an entirely spurious elaboration about "free-floating tears" and a dissolution of identities. The patronymic of Achilles' prize in the *Iliad* is Briseis (p. 11 and index).

B. and Žižek are well aware that what is operating here is a nostalgia for something that never existed. The community, in its assertion of pure self-identity, has always already been breached by differences that have been repressed or denied. But that significant condition, "always already," deflates the construct of "the first" on which B.'s work depends, and undermines the story of the Fall. This is a major point: all forms of society have sought to recreate an internal purity by means of concepts, strategies, and arguments that are ultimately shared with racist ideology. (In this regard, Žižek is wise to warn against a certain rush to historicize where the overriding object is to keep outsiders out. Purism takes many forms.)

From this perspective, there thus remains something inherently xenophobic about B.'s response to Odysseus. He shows no sensitivity to the element of the accursed in that composite figure. In Odysseus there are strands of the persecuted outsider, the pariah, the wandering outcast, the Ishmael, and the Frankenstein. B. is all too ready to indict Odysseus as a monster (chap. 5 deals with "Metis and Monstrosity"), and the armature of his book is the formulation of an Odysseus-Achilles-Cyclops-bia psychosis. (The case for the monster, defended vigorously in the first chapter, is swiftly reversed thereafter.) B. eschews a "conventional humanist identification with the hero" that "preserv[es] a belief in his good intentions" (p. 16). Odysseus the survivor is no savior. He is a "people-destroyer." He is truly Cyclopean: when his comrades devour the cattle of the sun does he not, in effect, "turn a blind eye" (p. 171), betraying a "repressed desire to kill" those same "comrades" (p. 134)? In sum, there is for B. something distinctly odious about Odysseus, most of all in his role as master.

It would be easy to be dismissive of the application of Lacan to literature, but Lacan was a man of acute intelligence. When confronted by a fractious throng of students at Vincennes in the heady days of '68, he rebuked them, "What you as a revolutionary aspire to is a Master. You will have one." Bob Dylan led a generation with aphoristic firepower: "Don't follow leaders; watch your parking meters." Some of the contradictions are recapitulated in the graffito "Don't read this." B. rejects Odysseus out of a distrust for leaders, but he eagerly follows Žižek, who is himself an ardent follower of the master Lacan. B. is right to sense vulnerabilities in conventional accounts of the Odyssey, but his project of reading the Odyssey as an allegory of ideological control is weakened by his assessment of the "idiocy of Odysseus's authority" (p. 61). The assonance was no doubt irresistible, but the statement also reflects Žižek's outlook, where much of life is largely an absurdity, something for which he feels "a profound disgust." At the same time, B. cannot completely dissociate himself from Odysseus, who is a fundamentally ambivalent figure. If Odysseus is a bane, he is also a benefit. It might be said that Odysseus fulfills a similar role to that which B. defines for himself: Odysseus is a figure of enlightenment who brings knowledge, who destroys narcissistic fantasies, and who delivers necessary Lacanian life lessons.

Hegel's *Phenomenology* has been described as a modern *Odyssey*. The mind journeys out into and through the world to return finally to itself. Adorno and Horkheimer read Hegel and the *Odyssey* this way, claiming that the Homeric epic presented "the fundamental history of subjectivity." From this angle, one might define B.'s undertaking in *The Limits of Heroism* as an attempt to rewrite that Odyssean history of the subject in Lacanian terms (although the Lacanian founding of that history in structural linguistics now appears like something that belongs to the past). Nostalgia is

a key term in B.'s critique of traditional approaches. It has long been recognized that Hegel yearned for an idealized past, a Hellas that never existed. B. takes the myth of return in the *Odyssey* and finally makes of it an Odyssean attempt to return to what is no more than a myth.

In this account, Odysseus has idealized Penelope and his relationship with her. The faithful Penelope is, like Woman in general, a product of male fantasy. Penelope is a Pandora; like the protean Odysseus and, more widely, all human subjects, these women offer a masquerade to hide a void within. They, and we, hide nothing—in two senses. From the Lacanian viewpoint, the story of every human subject is one of "an infinite craving of Nothing for Something" (Žižek's formulation in his 1994 article in New Formations). B. suggests that Penelope's beauty and her virtue are all a show to flatter her male audience. And here, without recognizing its Hegelian homeland, the analysis reaches its culminating point: Penelope desires to be desired. On the return of Odysseus to Ithaca, Penelope provides him with "a glimpse into his own emptiness" (p. 226). The assumption on which the entire nostos has been founded, Penelope's fidelity, is called into question and allowed to be seen as possibly "an illusion." In its conclusion the study restates a message articulated by Adorno and Horkheimer: "The nimble-witted survives only at the price of his own dream, which he wins only by demystifying himself . . . He can never have everything."

Max Weber characterized our modernity as an age of disenchantment. B.'s work on Homer underlines the force of that observation. This is a study in disillusionment driven by a desire not to be taken in—constantly suspicious, often cynical, and always knowing. The Žižekian note is struck in what is taken to be an Odyssean joke. Odysseus disguises his men as sheep to escape from the cave of the Cyclops: "How best can you fool an ideological dupe, a sheep, into thinking he is not a sheep? By disguising him as one!" (p. 153); Adorno and Horkheimer had quoted Nietzsche on "the way in which the masses are fooled." One cannot help feeling that there is something fundamentally inimical to the imaginative poetic undertaking in the attempt to dissolve our "fantasies" and to relieve us of our "illusions." B. advocates a more clever "Epimethean" reading of the *Odyssey*, claiming that there have been too many Promethean readings. But he himself has lost sight of an essential Promethean quality in his approach to Homer: *eunoia* (Aesch. *PV* 446).

B.'s work has at times the character of an exposé. In his own eyes he has dared to bring into the daylight the unpalatable, darker side of heroism, its "hidden truth" (p. 112). The heroic ethos, or ideology, rests upon an "unspoken/unspeakable superegoic fantasy of total destruction" (p. 113). In this schema, Agamemnon represents public law, war regulated by rules; Achilles displays the reverse of the law in which all restrictions are lifted. B. makes much of the well-known paradox that law and justice often generate the very violence they seek to prohibit. He has a point, in that critics have often sought to mitigate the violence of the problematic Achilles. But B.'s exposé may seem a rather shallow and even mean-spirited account when set against the complexity and profundity of the *Iliad*. There it is Agamemnon who, in Book 6, articulates the desire for total destruction, "let not one escape . . . not even

^{9.} Dialectic, 57.

^{10.} Dialectic, 44.

^{11.} See, for example, the quandaries of the Kirk commentary on the *Iliad* (Cambridge, 1993) in dealing with ἀεικέα ἔργα at 22.395.

the child the mother carries in her womb; let all perish together from Ilios, utterly blotted out and unmourned" (6.57–60). In the same book, the *Iliad* juxtaposes this call for total obliteration with the famously tender scene between a Trojan mother, her infant child, and the warrior-father. The *Iliad* does not seek to conceal its concern with total obliteration. It is precisely in that possibility that it creates much of its raison d'être. It is not insignificant that the epic ends with the construction of a $\sigma \tilde{\eta} \mu \alpha$, a conspicuously visible monument, for a defeated Trojan whom Achilles sought to erase.

For B. the *Odyssey* recapitulates the destructiveness of heroism in what he describes as two separate "mass deaths," those of Odysseus' companions and the suitors (p. 113). The subtitle of B.'s work, Homer and the Ethics of Reading, highlights what is in part an indictment, not only of those who disavow the violence in the Homeric epics, but those who, through "humanist rhetoric," attempt to justify it. Jasper Griffin's work is cited as an attempt to find "the supposed ethical depth of Achilles in the midst of his killing spree." This criticism is followed by a reference to Edward Said for "some astute remarks on the ability of contemporary humanist criticism to justify mass slaughter (in this case, the Vietnam War) within a rhetoric of ethical and aesthetical complexity" (p. 260). I take it that B. is referring to a remark that the Secretary of Defense during the period of heaviest bombing in the Vietnam War was observed to have a copy of Durrell's Alexandria Quartet on his desk. 12 This is a "complex conjunction," as Said comments, but hardly a complex instance of what we know and rue: those educated in the humanities are not always particularly humane. Homeric criticism has been well aware of what Griffin once described as "deeper, or darker, desires" to "abolish the memory" of one's opponent, and, echoing the Bible, "to make him as if he had never been." 13 Said was fond of quoting Walter Benjamin's observation that "every document of civilization is also a document of barbarism," "a notion that seems to me essentially a tragic humanistic truth of great significance." ¹⁴ But there is a substantial difference in tone between Said's registering of the tragic and B.'s hunt for the ideological.

Near the center of the book, B. refers disparagingly to the "chorus" of critics "who see only life in the *Odyssey*"; he argues that they "focus on the (supposedly) successful *nostos* of Odysseus and ignore the massive weight of death that haunts the proem and darkly reappears in the second Nekuia" (p. 142). "Mass slaughter," "two separate mass deaths," the "massive weight of death": in loading his argument in this way, B. displays something very much like the desire to "win at all costs" (p. 169) that he criticizes in "heroic ideology." One does not want to suggest that we ever need to abandon our critical faculties; Adorno and Horkheimer inveighed against "blind praise of a blind life." The very meaning of *sur-vival* is indissociable from a struggle with death. In the *Odyssey* this consists of encounters with destruction, loss of life and companions, contemplation of suicide, a passage through the Underworld, and, ultimately, a poetic reaffirmation of life—not as a disavowal of death, but as a suggestion of the value of a life beyond life and death, where life as mere existence is in itself never enough; where we need literature, and value the Homeric epics because they enhance life and encourage us to go on living.

^{12.} B. refers to p. 23 of Said's *The World, the Text and the Critic* (Cambridge, Mass., 1983), which is inaccurate. The reference, as I understand it, is to pp. 2–3.

^{13.} J. Griffin, Homer on Life and Death (Oxford, 1980), 46.

^{14.} E. W. Said, Humanism and Democratic Criticism (New York, 2004), 23.

^{15.} Dialectic, 44.

B. does not consider the converse of his proposition: the *Iliad* is not simply about death and glorified, death-dealing warriors. The Limits of Heroism does not allow for the ever-larger Homeric vision in a poem that explores every facet of the heroic, locating the all-too-human in the heroic and the heroic in the humbly human and sensitively portrayed animal world. Let us consider two examples from an epic in which such instances abound. In Book 12, the intense battle of the heroes is compared to the weighing of wool by a poor widow working to win a meager wage for her children. The verb in the comparison is the significantly charged ἔχειν, which in the epic connotes, beyond mere "holding," the quality of persistence in a hard-won life that quietly mirrors the heroic. Far from the arena of fame, the woman goes on living and working, earning a pittance to support her children. The tone is not sentimental; the description of her remuneration as ἀεικέα is a telling social comment. Again, at a time when the appropriateness of C. S. Lewis's choice of a lion to portray Christianity has been questioned, how can we forget the way in which Homer invokes, not only the lion, but also the donkey in the everyday fields to portray the sheer obduracy of the heroic? The constituent elements of heroism are reflected in so many ways across such a wide-ranging sweep of life that the subject cannot be limited to being merely a nihilistic male aristocratic ideology. Homer's vision is larger than the heroic. At the same time, where B. singles out Achilles as the only hero who "goes all the way" (p. 113), the book notably ignores the reworking of the heroic in the old and great figure of Priam, who undertakes the ultimate journey of endurance, performs a deed such as no man has ever dared or endured before, to kiss child-slaying hands at the risk of death in an epic journey that is significant for the conception of the Odyssey.

Adorno and Horkheimer in their treatment of Homer during World War II used the epic to indict new "pagans and warmongers." ¹⁶ During the same period, C. S. Lewis and T. S. Eliot repudiated Homer and turned to Virgil as the poet of civilization for the postwar world. Despite references to the war in Vietnam, B. seems unaware of the relative drought in Homeric studies during that period, when the discipline remained largely buried in the formalism of orality, and the subject of a rare general monograph was the theme of the mutilation of the corpse. It was only a decade after Vietnam that criticism began to associate war once more with immortal glory. In 2004, in attempting to formulate what the common reader in the early twenty-first century might find in the *Iliad*, Harold Bloom was able to repeat a charge he had already made almost twenty years earlier, that the Homeric warriors were "glorifiers of battle," striving always to be "the best of the Achaeans" in a context where the highest good was inevitably "victory." "The Iliad, except for the Yahwist, Dante, and Shakespeare, is the most extraordinary writing yet to come out of the West, but how much of it is spiritually acceptable to us, or would be, if we pondered it closely?" 17 B.'s work is an echo of the latter part of that proposition. The question itself still lacks a considered, sensitive, and cogent reply. The *Iliad* in particular has survived the very destructive twentieth century, and in the early twenty-first century it still stands, ready to tell a new tale, the spiritual value of which is, as always, much needed.

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^{16.} Dialectic, 31.

^{17.} H. Bloom, Where Shall Wisdom Be Found? (New York, 2004), 69.